

FAIRS AND CIRCUSES

We were not naturally attracted to the fairs as kids. Most probably we were simply not taken too often as our parents disliked them. Shady characters and dodgy popcorn or candyfloss. But I think children's books gave them a certain grubby charm. I liked the dodgems and had a go at the smaller roundabouts, big wheel and swings. They would come annually to the show grounds on the beach front. My mother was the more likely to take us for a drive around the beach front and let us “go and see”. As this was mainly during the day and the shows operated towards evening, there were few staff about. I climbed a helter-skelter and sort of slid down without a mat. I had always been attracted to the helter-skelter as it appeared in so many children's books.

The official show grounds were on a terraced area on the Esplanade now long since built over. I once remember a travelling display of a dead whale on the back of a truck there. And of course there were the circuses. Circuses too seemed enhanced by children's books such as the Ladybird series.

I remember Boswell's Circus well and later when it amalgamated with Wilkie, becoming the ubiquitous Boswell-Wilkie circus. All that stuff that in recent years has become so disdained by those with strong ethics about performing animals. (Only much later did I learn of how this circus was an early resister of apartheid policy on entertainment). Besides the magicians and daredevils on high trapeze or being shot from canon were acts by dogs, horses, lions, tigers, elephants etc. And clowns that I found more scary than funny. I clearly remember the dwarf clown Tickie (named after the small coin at the time). All watched with sour popcorn from raked rickety hard benches. Watching the Big Top go up was a display in its own right. While other races could be in the audience at circuses, they had their own section near the acts entrance flaps. Years later when we built our house using labour found in the street opposite Federated Timber, I actually bought a few of them tickets. They did enjoy it although had seen it before. In hindsight this simple memory shows how little formalised entertainment was available for other races under the apartheid regime.

For many years Boswell-Wilkie had no competition except for occasional visiting circuses such as small visiting Chinese ones. Their acts anyway were multinational and multicultural.

Then one day there was a new contender in the country. Chipperfield's Circus. And it mainly used what was for most of the year, the school sports fields at the top of our road in Selborne. As circuses do, they tend to employ some of the established acts of the visited country and Tickie was to appear here too. Lions could literally be heard growling as we went to bed at night. The Chipperfield' family had fallen foul of public opinion in the UK on animal rights issues. Mary Chipperfield had perhaps thought SA a new open market. Her circus ended up staying several years until economics and yet more accusations of animal cruelty put an end to it. All this side was not yet common knowledge in SA. I used to go up each afternoon to see the animals. Sometimes they used a site up off Devereux Avenue and that was also accessible by bike. Health and safety was unknown. I and other kids would wander into the makeshift stables to touch the horses and even the elephants. I even touched lion cubs through the bars of a trailer. And the circus even included a sort of travelling zoo. I remember llamas. We would give them xxx-mints which they loved. But if you ran out of them they spat at you. One day I befriended a baby baboon on a chain on the barrier fence (yes there was a barrier fence). It sat on my shoulder for ages. But when I wanted to leave it made a scene and clung onto my hair and ear. I was anxious about being bitten (It had probably had its canine teeth removed by this time). I asked for help. Mary Chipperfield appeared unconcerned. Eventually a clown, I think it was Tickie out of costume, came to my rescue. The Selborne sports field site had a small patch of “bushveld” between it and the railway line. We would sometimes see

elephants wandering around there untethered. Once a zebra got loose and trotted into the busy Union Avenue traffic.

Years later as a student visiting Copenhagen I went to an indoor circus. A chimpanzee got loose and rushed up the trapeze poles above us (they look much like Big Top tent poles). It got into an absolute frenzy and to my own horror was forced down aggressively.

I had also seen performing chimps in the Cape Town area – in a cinema. The supporting act before the film was some magic and then chimps on roller skates. The whole idea of pushing animals such as these that do not have a long history of domestication way beyond their natural instincts is these days considered quite horrendous in most societies. And even those that do seem to fit into a life of human servitude such as dogs and horses, are so often cajoled in unsatisfactory ways and forced to live very unnatural lives.

These may have been domesticated or semi-domesticated animals but all this must have somehow encouraged me to pursue an interest in wildlife conservation and I was regional chairman of the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa until emigrating.